BANGLADESH ELECTIONS 2026: HARMFUL DIGITAL NARRATIVES & BEHAVIORS

Snapshot Report | 16 – 31 January 2026

Introduction

This snapshot report examines emerging digital narratives and behaviors in the lead-up to Bangladesh's general elections and referendum, focusing on the period from 16 to 31 January 2026. The second half of January 2026 was marked by intensifying political dynamics and heightened digital discourse in Bangladesh as the country edged closer to the 12 February national elections. At least 15 political activists were reported killed amid pre-election tensions, contributing to fears of renewed unrest that many hoped had ended with earlier political transitions. Drawing on data from three social media platforms - Facebook, TikTok, and X - the analysis tracks the evolution of harmful digital narratives and behaviors, including mis- and disinformation, hate speech, and incitement to violence, alongside constructive narratives related to de-escalation, democratic norms, and social cohesion. Five key insights emerged from this period:

1. **Human rights and accountability now dominate online political discourse, overtaking hate speech -** Hate speech is now the third most discussed topic, suggesting a shift in online conversation volume. The focus is increasingly on offline tensions, uncertainty, accountability, and justice, continuing the trend established by the protests that led to the recent elections.

2. **Gendered abuse and misogynistic narratives emerged as a distinct and growing digital harm -** The start of campaigning saw a surge in targeted online gendered abuse against female candidates. This aligns with reports of rising gendered violence against women, coinciding with increased religious rhetoric from Jamaat about the role of women in society.

3. **Narratives about acts of violence, killing and massacres remain persistent** - This observation aligns with the increased reporting of political violence and vandalism. Reflecting the offline dynamics and engagement, with the intensification of political activities as the elections draw nearer.

4. **Scrutiny around the electoral process remains a key narrative -** As elections draw near, the electoral process remains a topic of conversation. The content encompasses a blend of constructive criticism, introspection on existing deficiencies, and proposals for enhancing the overall process.

5. **Election related conspiracy narratives expanded and intensified -** Consistent scrutiny of the electoral process perpetuates discussions concerning election conspiracy theories. These conversations primarily suggest that various political parties are exerting influence over the electoral process in ways that benefit their respective interests.

For this reporting period, a total of 209k content was collected from Facebook, TikTok and X, out of which 100k were classified for the purposes of analysis

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For a comprehensive understanding of the methodology, kindly refer to the [previous analysis report](#).
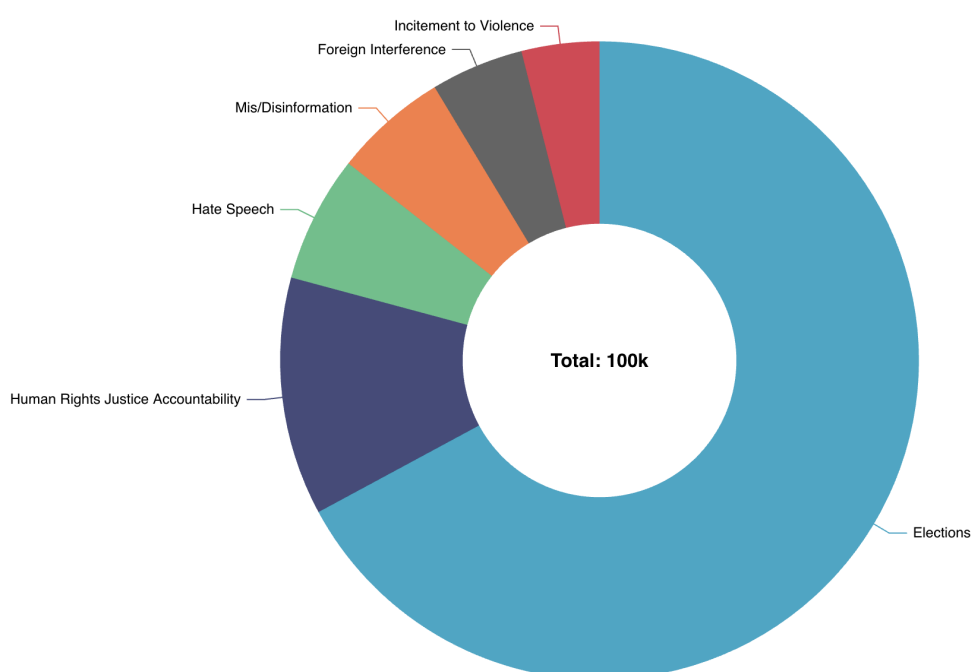
Current Political and Digital Environment

Political activity has intensified significantly as the election day approaches. Campaigning is in full swing, and there has been a corresponding increase in disputes between party candidates. Furthermore, there have been documented reports of vandalism and physical attacks targeting various candidates, with limited intervention or oversight from the authorities. [Experts](#) have warned of a likelihood of increased violence and mob mentality with increased pressure on the interim government to deliver a peaceful and transparent election.

On the digital front, social media continues to be a central arena for political engagement and contestation. Political parties and youth activists leveraged social media platforms for campaigning, even as online misinformation and polarizing narratives heightened concerns given low digital literacy among parts of the electorate. Bangladesh's broader digital environment sits against a backdrop of evolving internet freedoms where recent reforms have eased certain restrictions, but self-censorship persists and citizens remain wary of online expression under security-focused laws, a dynamic shaping how political discourse unfolds online.

Key Findings

KEY FINDING 1 | Human rights and accountability now dominate online political discourse, overtaking hate speech

During the period from 16 to 31 January, discussions related to Human Rights, Justice, and Accountability (12.1k posts) emerged as the second most prominent topic within the classified dataset, overtaking Hate Speech (6.42k posts) topics that had previously dominated the conversation earlier in January. This shift indicates a noticeable change in the focus of online political discourse as the election timeline advances. Public conversations increasingly referenced issues of rights, institutional responsibility, fairness, and calls for accountability in relation to both recent political developments and the broader electoral process.

At the same time, Mis/Disinformation (5.78k posts) dropped to the fourth position in overall conversation volume. While this suggests that other topics were being discussed more frequently during this period, it does not indicate that hateful content and mis/disinformation has meaningfully declined in absolute terms. Rather, the relative ranking reflects a diversification of discourse, where emerging governance, justice, and accountability concerns are occupying more digital attention alongside ongoing harmful narratives.

The evolving nature of online discourse mirrors shifts in offline events, marked by increased attention on the electoral process, allegations of violence and vandalism, and a focus on the interim government's term and ongoing reforms. This demonstrates that social media serves not merely as a platform for mass reactions to polarizing content but actively shapes public engagement with issues of institutional legitimacy, civic rights, and calls for transparency. It

provides a venue for ordinary Bangladeshis to voice their political opinions. Despite a relative decrease in its ranking, the persistent presence of hate speech underscores that communal and identity-based risks remain ingrained in the digital space and should not be underestimated, particularly with the emergence of tech-based gender abuse and the consistency of hate speech against the minority Hindu community.

Popular Narratives - Engagement

post_class	Number of Posts
Narrative: Posts that are de-escalating violent rhetoric and calling for peace	17k
Narrative: Posts claiming acts of violence, killings and massacres	14.3k
Narrative: Posts claiming that the July revolution and the political transition was propaganda	14.3k
Narrative: Posts claiming delegitimization of interim government	13.2k
Narrative: Posts claiming the spread of Mis/Disinformation by others	10.2k
Narrative: Posts discussing election rules and candidates	10.1k
Narrative: Posts discussing Osman Hadi's death and India and AL's influence	9.34k
Narrative: July Charter and its legitimacy	3.7k
Narratives: Posts claiming parties involved in election conspiracy	3.19k
Narrative: Posts containing hate speech towards Hindus	2.94k
Narrative: Post claiming elections cancelled or rigged	999

KEY FINDING 2 | Gendered abuse and misogynistic narratives emerged as a distinct and growing digital harm

Harmful Narratives - Engagement

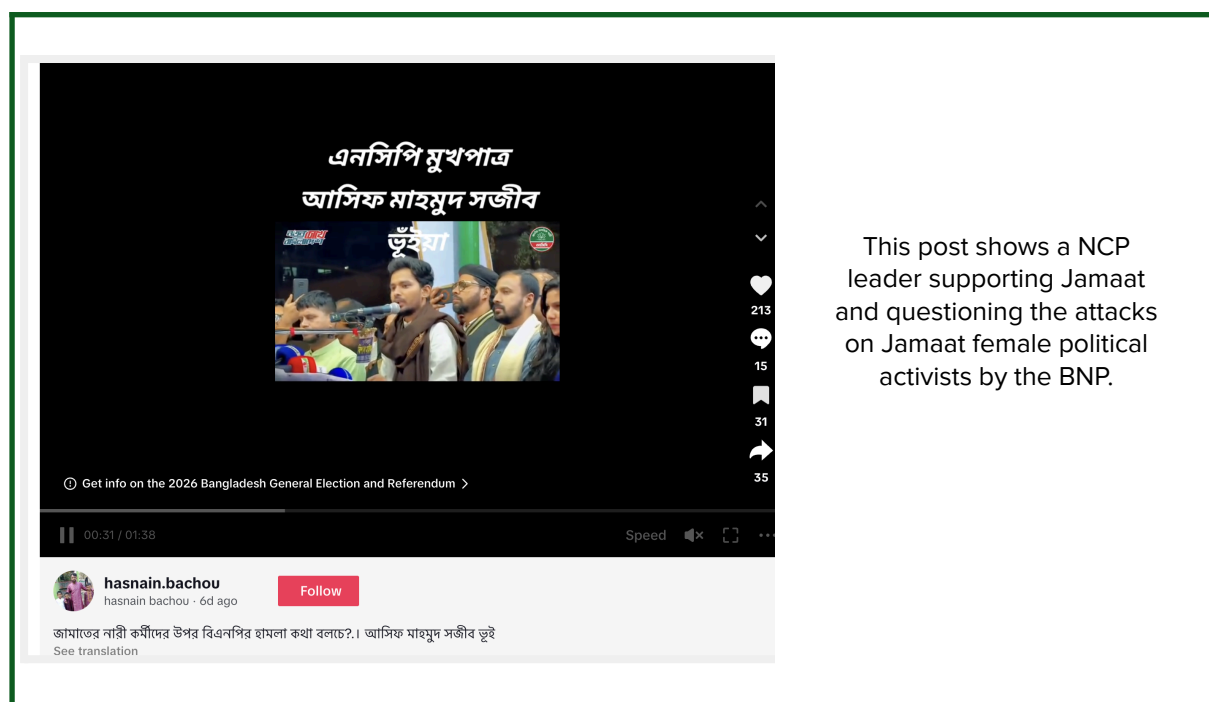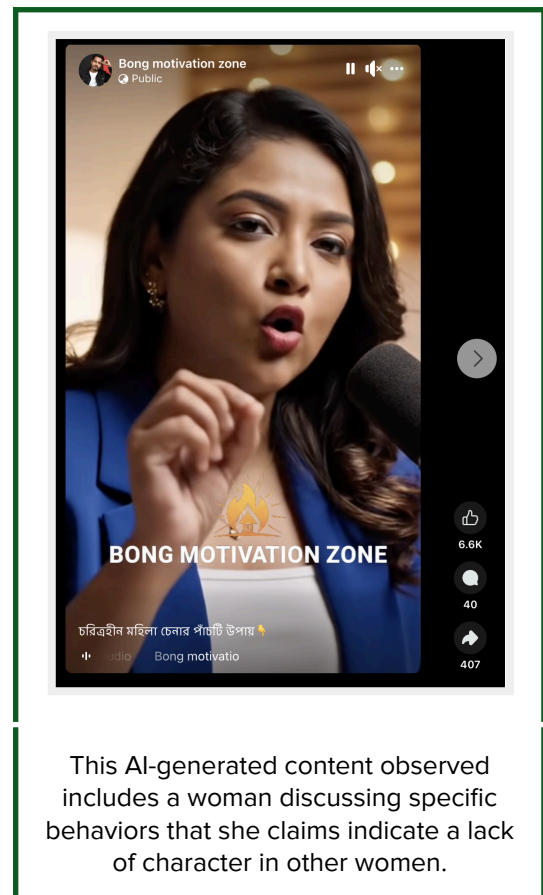| post_class	Number of Posts
Narrative: Posts claiming foreign interference in July protests and regime change	17.2k
Narrative: Posts claiming that the July revolution and the political transition was propaganda	14.3k
Narrative: Posts containing anti-India sentiments	14.1k
Narrative: Posts claiming delegitimization of interim government	13.2k
Narrative: Posts accusing "foreign agents"	4.54k
Narrative: Posts containing hate speech towards Hindus	2.94k
Narrative: Posts with high level of misogyny and tech-facilitated gendered abuse	2.87k

There was a noticeable increase in posts containing explicit misogyny and tech-facilitated gendered abuse (2.87k posts) directed at women in public life, including female candidates, activists, journalists, and commentators. This content ranged from sexually explicit insults and character attacks as well as use of AI generated content. In several cases, gendered slurs and humiliation tactics were used to delegitimize women's political participation along with gendered microaggressions aimed at women in general rather than engaging with their views or roles in the electoral process.

The surge occurs amidst a significant social discourse about women in public life due to highly patriarchal narratives emanating from Jamaat and its leaders', which frequently

interprets Islamic law to oppose women's participation in social and leadership roles. This resulted in reinforcing such misogynistic sentiments but also provoked reactions from different groups countering this narrative online.

Many of these posts were designed for virality, blending humor, ridicule, and sexualized language to normalize harassment while evading straightforward moderation triggers. The emergence of this pattern is significant because it demonstrates how electoral discourse is also becoming a site for gendered intimidation at a broader level. Some of the posts under this classification also related to discourse around women candidates and incidence of offline attacks and harassment.

Although some posts are not directly related to the election, the increase in such content during January suggests a concentrated effort to influence public perception on what constitutes women empowerment.

This AI-generated content observed includes a woman discussing specific behaviors that she claims indicate a lack of character in other women.

This post shows a NCP leader supporting Jamaat and questioning the attacks on Jamaat female political activists by the BNP.

KEY FINDING 3 | Narratives about acts of violence, killing and massacres remain persistent

Posts claiming acts of violence, killings, and massacres (14.3k posts) continued to circulate and in this period appeared both as reactions to reported incidents and also accounts of past political violence and unrest around the electoral time and comparing it to current events. This also includes posts discussing impending unrest.

Consequently, the ongoing surge of violence, politically motivated attacks, and vandalism since the July 2024 protests has intensified discussions regarding institutional failures, political persecution, blame game between candidates, and the inherent risks of violence associated with the electoral cycle as campaigning progresses rapidly.

Additionally, the ongoing discussion and engagement surrounding posts about Osman Hadi's death highlight a persistent issue: political violence remains a significant element of Bangladesh's electoral process, manifesting in various ways. Hadi's death, in particular, has sparked sustained public outrage, demonstrating the people are demanding greater accountability and the fulfillment of justice and reform promises made by the Interim government.

KEY FINDING 4 | Scrutiny around the electoral process remains a key narrative focus

Sustained attention to the electoral process continued to shape a significant portion of online discourse. Since early January, posts discussing election rules and candidates (10.1k posts) have consistently focused on the Election Commission's decisions, candidate eligibility, the appeals process, rule enforcement, and procedural transparency as the campaigning period advances. Posts reflected growing public engagement with the mechanics of the election itself, with users debating whether rules were being applied consistently and whether institutional decisions reflected neutrality and fairness.

Importantly, this trend indicates that digital platforms are serving as a space where public understanding of the electoral process is being constructed in real time. While such engagement reflects heightened civic interest, it also creates fertile ground for misinterpretation, rumor, and narrative manipulation, particularly when procedural decisions are communicated slowly or without sufficient clarity as evident from the volume of posts under Mis/Disinformation and posts concerning election conspiracy .

KEY FINDING 5 | Election related conspiracy narratives expanded and intensified

Posts suggesting that political parties were involved in election-related conspiracies (3.19k posts) became increasingly visible across platforms. These narratives framed the electoral process not as a neutral administrative exercise, but as one being covertly manipulated by competing political actors working behind the scenes to influence outcomes, discredit

opponents, or control institutional decisions. Claims ranged from allegations that specific parties were colluding with elements inside the state apparatus, to assertions that electoral procedures were deliberately designed to advantage or disadvantage certain actors.

Unlike direct criticism of the Election Commission's procedural decisions, these posts moved beyond scrutiny into speculative and often unverified interpretations of intent. Developments that would typically be routine, such as rule enforcement, nomination appeals, or the disqualification of candidates, were commonly reinterpreted by political parties as proof of strategic manipulation or concealed coordination.

Implications for the Upcoming Elections

The analysis of the January 16 to 31 period indicates further critical risks and challenges in addition to the one identified in the [January 1 to 15 snapshot](#) that could impact the integrity and environment of the upcoming elections and referendum. The new implications identified:

- **Call for justice and accountability is intrinsically linked to the continued violence online and offline** | Electoral violence remains a fixture in Bangladeshi politics; however, the current difference lies in the public's heightened demand for accountability in response to these incidents. Discussions related to killings, vandalism, and political clashes are no longer limited to expressions of fear or outrage, but are increasingly framed through demands for justice, institutional responsibility, and transparency. This shift is closely tied to the growing use of social media as a space where citizens shape public opinion, contest narratives, and call for action in real time. With each verified or exaggerated incident of unrest, it becomes a risk that challenges the integrity of the entire political and electoral process.

- **Rise in misogyny and gendered abuse threatens inclusive political participation** | The emergence of explicit misogyny and tech-facilitated gendered abuse directed at women in public life presents a significant risk to inclusive civic participation during the electoral period. Female candidates, activists, and commentators are being targeted with sexualized insults, humiliation tactics, and coordinated harassment that seek to delegitimize their presence in political discourse. Unaddressed, this environment risks narrowing the space for women's political engagement and reinforcing exclusionary practices. It also enables patriarchal and far-right voices to use religious rhetoric to influence less educated groups and advance oppressive viewpoints.

- **Electoral procedures are being politicized and reframed through conspiracy narratives in real time on social media** | Electoral procedures and rule enforcement are being actively interpreted and debated across digital platforms as political actions rather than administrative processes. Public understanding of how the election functions is increasingly being shaped by online discussions rather than official explanations. The current information environment is characterized by intense speculation and a steady flow of mis/disinformation. This complex landscape leaves room for trust erosion in the electoral process, making it difficult for voters to believe the elections will be free and fair.

Failure by established institutions to ensure maximum transparency and challenge persistent speculation can heavily influence how voters perceive the process's legitimacy, even before voting commences, by allowing it to become politicized. Ultimately, this situation either weakens trust in the process itself or serves as an indicator of an already compromised system.

Conclusion

The findings from the January 1 to 15 snapshot and the current one show that Bangladesh's digital information environment is becoming increasingly shaped by debates around institutional legitimacy, accountability, and electoral fairness, rather than only by overtly harmful content. Hate speech remains a significant element in election-related discourse, with specific attacks targeting gender and minority groups, influencing who participates and how. Social media is no longer only a space where political opinions are shared, but where public understanding of the electoral process itself is being formed in real time. As the country approaches election day, the interaction between offline political tensions and online narrative amplification presents growing risks to civic trust, inclusive participation, and perceptions of legitimacy that extend beyond the immediate electoral moment.

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